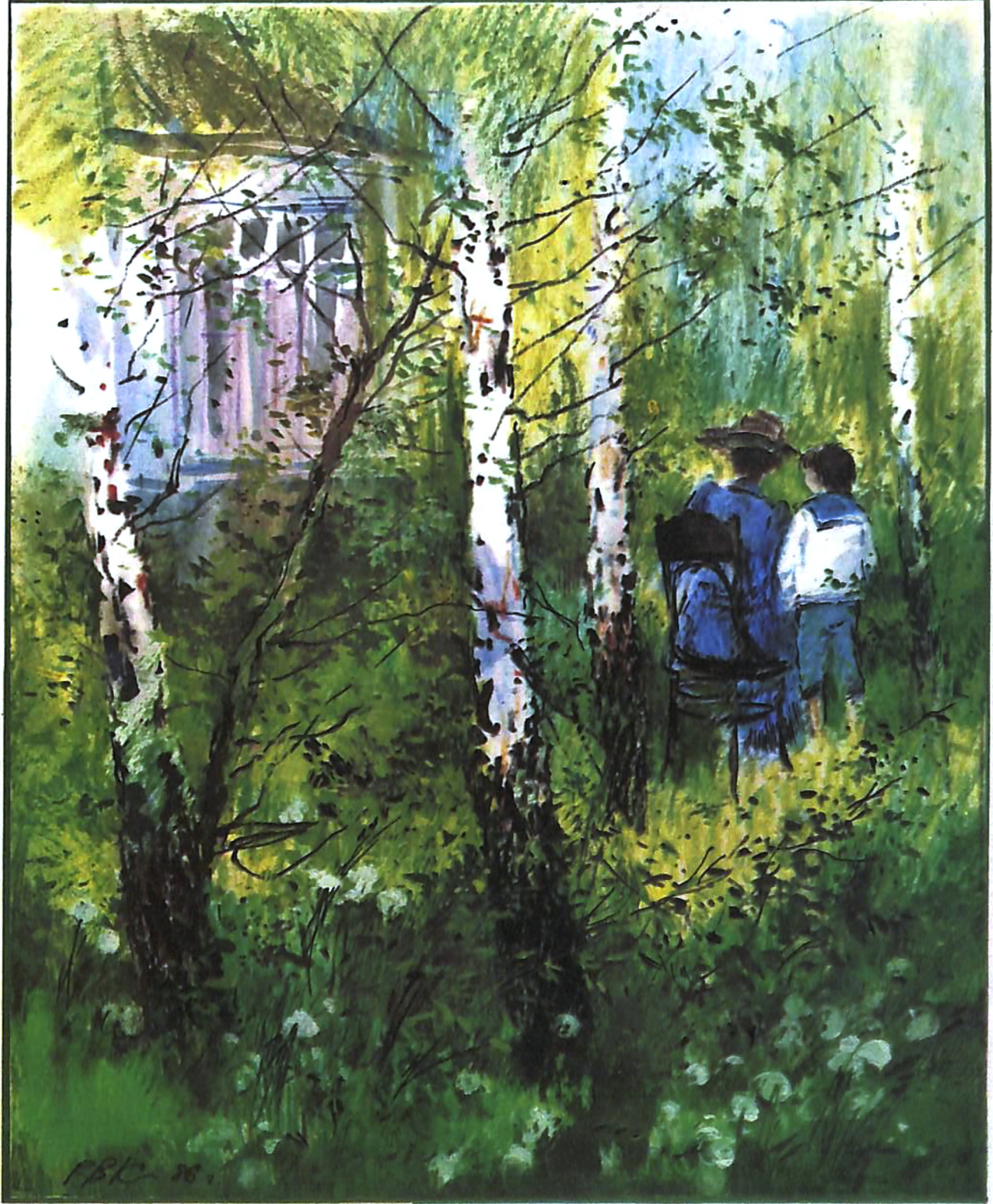


Alexei Tolstoy



YELLOWBEAK





Yellowbeak sat on a tuft of grass in blazing sunlight in the corner between the porch and the house wall, and watched with horror as Nikita approached him.

Yellowbeak threw back his head and his beak, with a yellow stripe running all along its length, rested on his thick crop. He ruffled up all his feathers and brought his legs under his stomach. Nikita bent over him. Yellowbeak opened his beak wide to frighten the boy. Nikita lifted him in the palms of his hands. Yellowbeak was a grey-feathered baby starling. He must have tried to fly out of his nest, but his inexperienced wings would not hold him. He had fallen and hidden in a corner, sitting on the dandelion leaves pressed to the ground.

Yellowbeak's heart was pounding heavily. "They'll gobble me up in no time," he thought. He himself knew very well how to eat worms, flies and caterpillars.

The boy brought him close to his mouth, Yellowbeak closed his black eyes and his heart beat fast under his feathers. But Nikita only breathed on his head and carried him into the house: it must mean he was full and had decided to eat Yellowbeak a little later.

When Alexandra Leontyevna saw the baby starling, she took him between the palms of her hands and breathed on his head, just as Nikita had done before.

"It's very, very young, poor dear," she said. "It's beak's still yellow. Yellowbeak."

They put the starling on the sill of an open window which overlooked a garden and was veiled with cheesecloth on the outer side. On the inner side it was also veiled with cheesecloth. Yellowbeak immediately hid in a corner, trying to show them that he was determined to fight for his life.

Outside, beyond the white haze of the cheesecloth, leaves were rustling and despicable sparrows—all of them thieves and impudent fellows—were fighting on a bush. From the other side Nikita was looking at him through the cheesecloth. He had incomprehensible, fascinating, moving eyes. "I've had it," Yellowbeak thought.

But when evening came, Nikita had not yet eaten him. He only put some flies and worms behind the cheesecloth. "They're fattening me," Yellowbeak thought, looking at an eyeless red worm that wriggled like a snake before his very beak. "I won't eat that worm: it's a trick."

The sun set behind the leaves. The grey, sleepy light made it difficult for Yellowbeak to keep his eyes open: he tried to cling more firmly to the sill with his tiny claws. The moment came when his eyes could no longer see anything. In the garden the birds had fallen silent. The sleepy, sweet smell of grasses and dampness wafted in through the window. Yellowbeak's head sank deeper and deeper into his feathers. Ruffling them up defiantly—just in case—Yellowbeak bent forward a little and fell asleep.

He was woken up by the sparrows: they behaved outrageously, fighting on a lilac branch. In the greyish light wet leaves could be seen. Somewhere in the distance a starling started trilling sweetly and merrily. "I'm terribly hungry. I even feel sick," Yellowbeak thought, and saw a worm that had got half of its body into a crack in the sill. He jumped over to it, caught it by the tail, pulled it out, and swallowed it. It turned out to be rather tasty.





The blue of the light deepened. The birds started singing. And then a warm, bright sunbeam reached Yellowbeak through the leaves. "I'm not going to die yet," Yellowbeak thought. He jumped across to a fly, pecked it and swallowed it.

At that moment he heard somebody's loud steps. Nikita approached the window and pushed his huge hand behind the cheesecloth. Unclenching his fist, he poured a lot of flies and worms on the sill. Yellowbeak cowered in a corner and ruffled up his feathers, staring at the hand. It hung over his head a minute, and then withdrew behind the cheesecloth. Those strange, fascinating, iridescent eyes were again fixed on him.

When Nikita had gone, Yellowbeak recovered and started thinking. "He hasn't eaten me, but he easily could. So he doesn't eat birds. Then I've got nothing to fear."

He ate his fill, cleaned his feathers with his beak and jumped about on the sill, looking at the sparrows. He picked out an old sparrow with a bald patch on the back of his head and started teasing him, turning his head and trilling: tr-r-rr, chir-r-rup, tr-r-rr, chir-r-rup. The sparrow got angry, ruffled up his feathers, rushed at Yellowbeak with an open beak—and ran

straight into the cheesecloth. "That will teach you!" Yellowbeak thought and strutted about on the window-sill.

Then Nikita appeared again and brought his hand—empty this time—too close to Yellowbeak. He jumped up and pecked his finger as hard as he could. Then he jumped back and got ready for a fight. But Nikita only opened his mouth and shouted, "Ha, ha, ha!"

So the day passed: there was nothing to fear and the food was good, but it was a little boring. Yellowbeak could hardly wait for dusk to fall. And he slept very nicely that night.

In the morning he ate and began to look for a way to escape from the cheesecloth veil. He walked all along the window, but found no crack. Then he hopped to the saucer and began to drink, drawing some water into his tiny beak, throwing back his little head, and swallowing: a tiny drop rolled down his throat.

The day was long. Nikita brought him worms and cleaned the sill with a goose feather. Then the bald-headed sparrow decided to fight a jackdaw, who gave him such a push that he fell into the leaves like a stone and stared out defiantly, with ruffled feathers.

For some reason a magpie came flying by. It chattered, wagged its tail and bustled about under Yellowbeak's window, but it did nothing worth talking about.



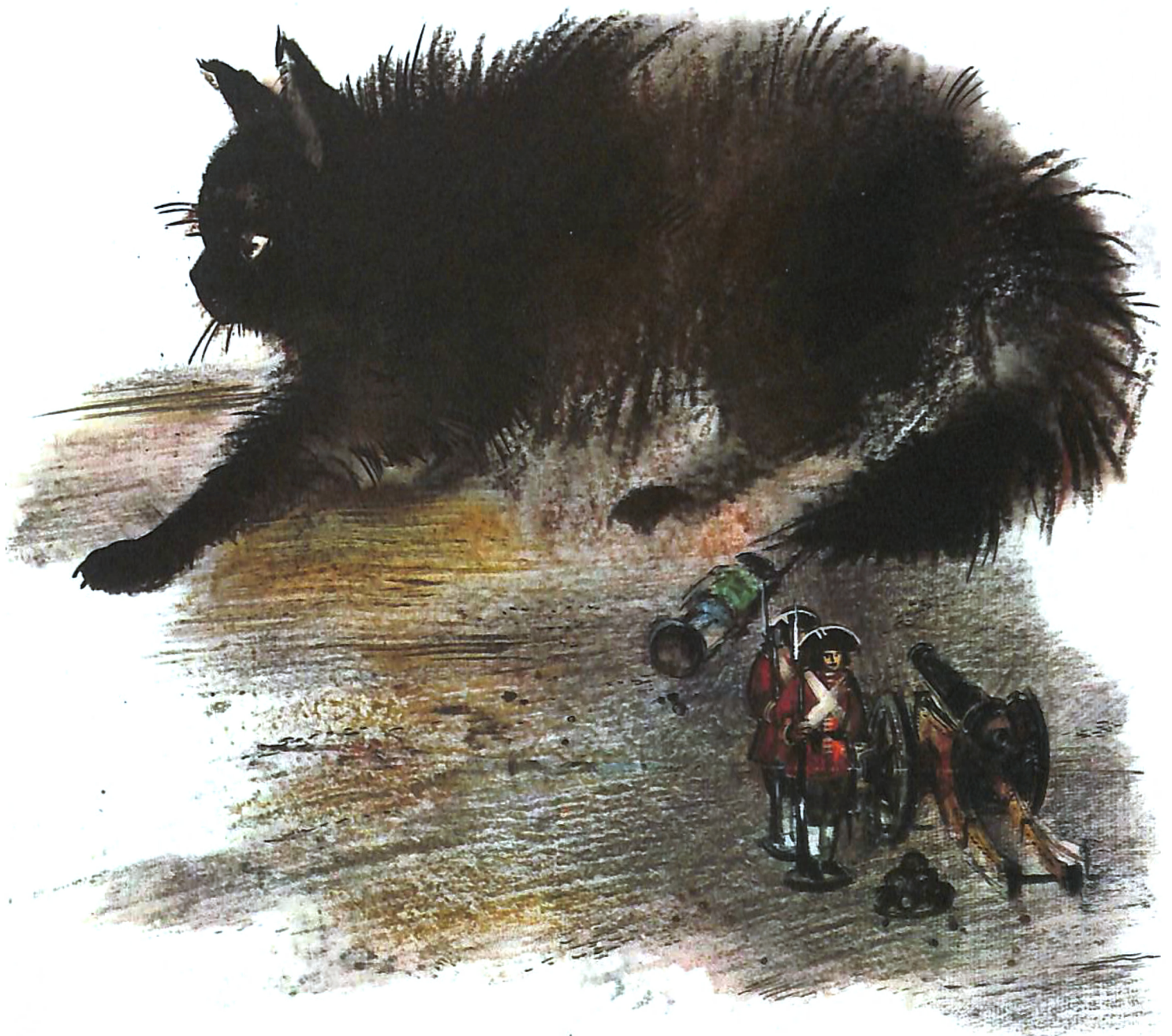


A robin sang sweetly about warm sunlight and honey-scented clover. It made Yellowbeak quite sad. His throat tickled: he wanted to sing, but where could he? Surely not on the sill, behind a cheesecloth net...!

He walked about on the sill once more and noticed a terrible animal. It was crawling on its short soft legs, with its stomach close to the floor. It had a round head with sparse, sticking-out whiskers, and its green eyes with elongated pupils

gleamed with fiendish hatred. Yellowbeak crouched and did not stir.

Basil the tomcat jumped up softly and plunged his claws into the edge of the sill. He stared at Yellowbeak through the cheesecloth and opened his mouth.... O Lord!... The cat's mouth was studded with fangs longer than the starling's beak.... The cat hit the cheesecloth with his paw and tore it.... Yellowbeak's heart missed a beat and his wings became limp....





But at that very moment—just in time—there appeared Nikita. He seized the cat by the scruff of his neck and threw him to the door. Basil howled resentfully and sneaked away, dragging his tail behind him.

“There is no animal stronger than Nikita,” Yellowbeak thought after that, and when Nikita came up to the window again, he allowed him to stroke his head, although he sat back on his tail from fear all the same.

That day came to an end, too. Next morning, very cheerful, Yellowbeak started to explore his premises once more and he immediately spotted the hole in the cheesecloth where the cat had torn it with his claws. Yellowbeak pushed his head through the hole, looked around, climbed out, jumped up into the light crisp air and flew just above the floor, fluttering his wings very, very rapidly.

In the doorway he flew higher and saw four people in a second room, sitting at a round table. They were eating—taking large pieces with their hands and putting them in their mouths. They all turned their heads and stared at Yellowbeak. He realised that he had to stop in the air and turn back, but he





could not make that difficult turn in full flight—he fell on one wing, turned over and sat down on the table between the jam dish and the sugar bowl.... And he immediately saw Nikita in front of him. Then, without thinking twice, he jumped on the jam dish and from there onto Nikita's shoulder, where he sat down, perked up his feathers and even half-closed his eyes.

After resting a while on Nikita's shoulder, Yellowbeak flew up to the ceiling, caught a fly, sat a while on a rubber plant in a corner, circled round the chandelier and, feeling hungry, flew to his window-sill, where fresh worms had been prepared for him.

Before dusk, Nikita put on the sill a little wooden hut with a porch, a door and two windows. Yellowbeak liked it that it was dark inside the hut. He jumped into it, tossed and turned for a while, and fell asleep.

The same night Basil the cat, who had been locked up in the cellar as punishment for his attack on Yellowbeak, miaowed hoarsely and refused even to catch mice—he just sat at the cellar door and miaowed so loudly that even he himself found it unpleasant.

And so, besides the cat and a hedgehog, a third lodger appeared in the house: Yellowbeak. He was very independent, clever and enterprising. He liked to listen to people talking, and when they sat down to table, he listened attentively, bending his head and saying in his melodious sing-song, “Sash-sh-sh-a” *—and bowed. Alexandra Leontyevna maintained that he bowed precisely to her. On seeing him, she always said, “Hello, my gay little birdie.” And Yellowbeak would jump on the train of her dress and ride on it, very pleased with himself.

* Sasha is short for Alexandra/Alexander

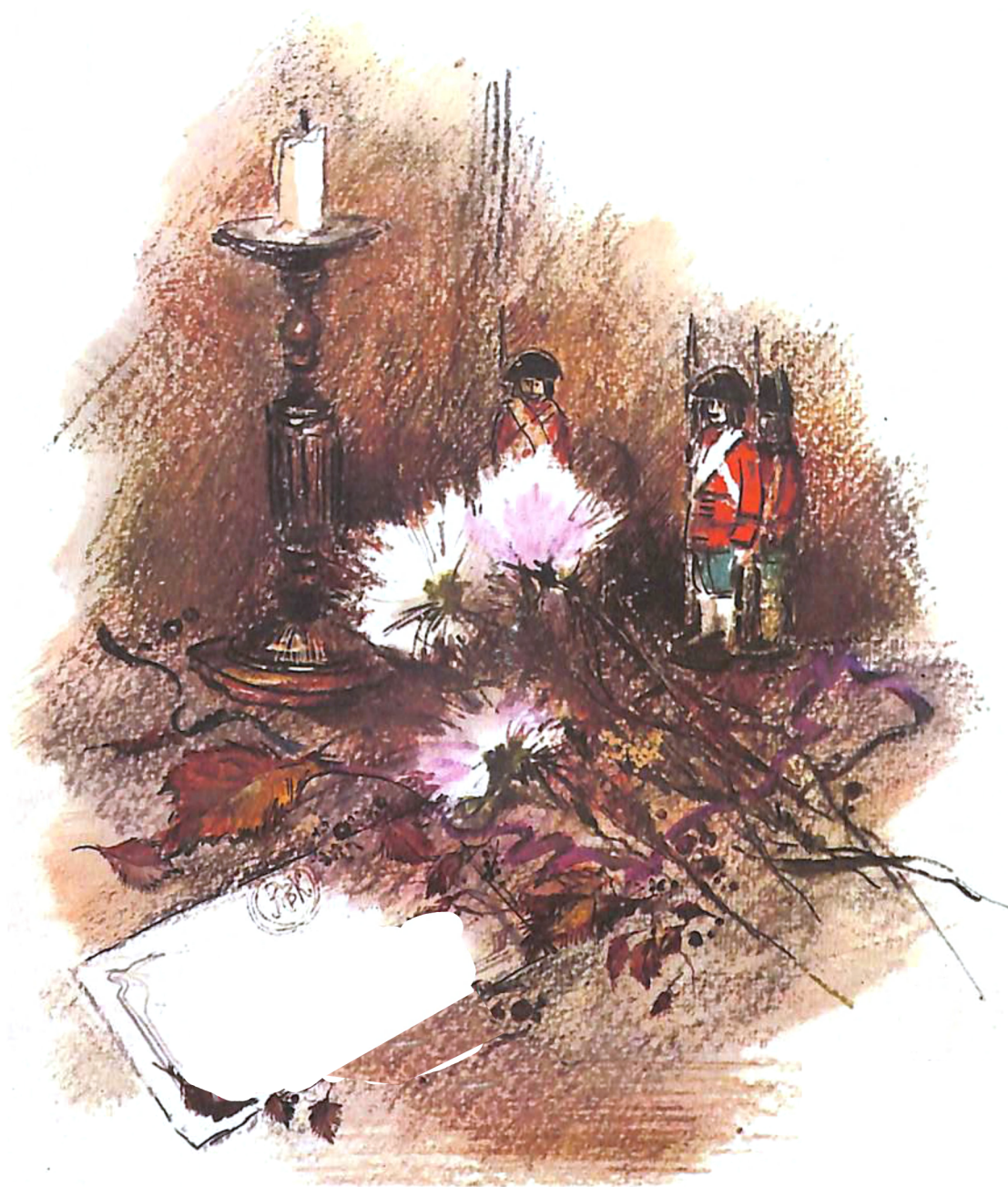


He lived thus till autumn came. He grew up, became covered with dark feathers shot with the gleaming black of a crow wing, learned to speak Russian quite well, and spent nearly all day in the garden. But when dusk fell, he always returned to his little house on the window-sill.

In August wild starlings invited him to join their flock, taught him to fly, and when the golden leaves in the garden began falling, one day at dawn Yellowbeak flew away with birds of passage—far away, beyond the seas, to Africa.







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